



81 years since the liberation of Auschwitz: 'Let memory become a light'

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At Auschwitz-Birkenau commemorations, speakers warn against reducing memory to ritual, urging instead that it serve as a guiding light and ethical responsibility. A survivor and the Museum Director describe remembrance as crucial amid growing global instability.

Memory must not turn into a ritual or a “lesson to be checked off,” speakers stressed during the anniversary commemorations at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the former German Nazi concentration camp. Survivor Bernard Offen appealed: “Let memory not be a burden. Let it become a light that will guide us in the darkness,” while Auschwitz Museum Director Piotr Cywiński spoke of memory and experience as “treasures” and “signposts” in a time when the global order is fracturing.

A Day of Remembrance

Although the main ceremony with Survivors, state officials, and the diplomatic corps took place in the afternoon, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau was commemorated throughout the day on the grounds of the former camp. In the morning, around 20 former prisoners laid wreaths and candles at the Death Wall at the former Auschwitz I. This was the opening act of the observances marking the 81st anniversary of the camp’s liberation.

A Testimony About “My Angels”

The main address during the ceremony, held in a former camp intake building, was delivered by Holocaust survivor Bernard Offen, born in Kraków in 1929. He recalled a childhood cut short by war, the murder of his mother and sister in Bełżec, and the moment he was separated from his father in Auschwitz. “My father was sent to the left, toward death. I was sent to the right. I remember that moment. Our eyes met, and there was the feeling that we were seeing each other for the last time,” he said.

He stressed that he survived thanks to others: “I survived because other people helped me. I call them my angels.” After decades of living in the United States, Offen decided to return to Poland. He spoke of Kraków as the place where he found a home and a sense of safety again. He appealed to those present: “I ask you today—let memory not be a burden. Let it become a light that will guide us in the darkness. We, the witnesses, will soon be gone, but I believe that this light will remain with you.”

Memory and Experience

Auschwitz Museum Director Dr. Piotr Cywiński devoted his remarks to a reflection on memory and experience, describing them as twin concepts essential for contemporary society. He noted that in times when a “painstakingly built order” is cracking and international law is being “violated,” memory cannot be treated as a burden or a formal obligation. “Memory should not be seen as a lesson to be done, but far more as a source of real support and a growth in awareness,” Dr. Cywiński emphasized. As he added, it is precisely the experience of Survivors that becomes the foundation of memory and a “power—both individual and social.”

The Sources of Crime and Responsibility

President Karol Nawrocki stated that Auschwitz “remains a symbol of total dehumanization” and “was a factory of death organized by the Germans.” He stressed that the crime of the Holocaust and the murder of six million Jews—including three million Polish citizens—were the result of the policies of a specific German state, which enjoyed social support from the 1930s onward.

Nawrocki recalled that the Holocaust was preceded by years of global indifference and mass crimes, including those committed against Poles between 1939 and 1941.

Against Silence

Yossi Matias, representing donors to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation, spoke about the transition from living memory to historical memory. “We are approaching a critical threshold,” he observed, pointing to the passing of eyewitnesses and the need to cultivate what Survivors leave behind. Matias also emphasized the importance of digitizing Holocaust testimonies so that the truth remains accessible to future generations and is not displaced by forgetting or denial.

The Liberation of Auschwitz

By January 27, 1945—the day approximately 7,000 prisoners still in the camp were liberated by soldiers of the Red Army—German Nazis had murdered about 1.1 million people in Auschwitz, primarily Jews, as well as Poles, Roma, Soviet prisoners of war, and people of other nationalities.

Today, Auschwitz stands as a global symbol of the Holocaust and the atrocities of World War II. In 2005, the United Nations designated January 27 as International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

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